The New York Times

ART & DESIGN | **ART REVIEW**

Haunting ‘Ruins and Rituals’ Begins ‘A Year of Yes’ at Brooklyn Museum

By KAREN ROSENBERG NOV. 10, 2016

Bottom, “Untitled (Accordion Self-Portrait Book),” and above, a cluster of Polaroid self-portraits of Beverly Buchanan from “Ruins and Rituals.” Emon Hassan for The New York Times

A stirring show of the African-American artist Beverly Buchanan kicks off “A Year of Yes: Reimagining Feminism at the Brooklyn Museum,” a rallying cry of events and exhibitions devoted to art by women. In some ways, this ruminative exhibition, “Beverly Buchanan — Ruins and Rituals,” is an odd fit for this powerfully affirmative program; Ms. Buchanan (1940-2015) made haunting sculptures, earthworks, photographs and drawings inspired by the architecture of the rural South and its deeply embedded histories of injustice, poverty and loss.

Her art frequently assumes the solemn tone of a memorial and evokes a civilization in physical and moral decay through small wooden sculptures resembling falling-down shacks to modest arrangements of stones and building materials — uncommissioned

monuments, essentially — at public sites with suppressed or little-acknowledged legacies of racism.

But in its own wry and timely way, Ms. Buchanan's work is profoundly uplifting. As she put it in a 1982 interview with Essence, "A lot of my pieces have the word 'ruins' in their titles because I think that tells you this object has been through a lot and survived — that's the idea behind the sculptures … it's like, 'Here I am; I'm still here!'"

Foreground, from left: Beverly Buchanan's "Old Colored School," "Low Country House," and one part of "Three Families (A Memorial Piece with Scars)." Emon Hassan for The New York Times

Organized by the guest curators Jennifer Burris and Park McArthur, an artist, with help from the Brooklyn Museum curators Catherine Morris and Cora Michael, the exhibition stresses Ms. Buchanan's relationship to canonical movements like Post-Minimalism, land art and feminism. This may seem like an academic detail, but it's important, because she is often lumped in with self-taught (a.k.a. outsider) Southern artists who share her interest in the regional vernacular. She grew up in South Carolina, traveling around the state with her adoptive father (an agriculture professor and dean at South Carolina State University), and the spare wooden dwellings of tenant farmers stayed with her.

Although Ms. Buchanan came to art as a second career, after a decade as a public health educator in East Orange, N.J., she sought out professional instruction and made many insider connections, taking classes with the abstract painter and activist Norman Lewis

at the Art Students League of New York and finding another mentor in Lewis's friend Romare Bearden. She won Guggenheim and National Endowment for the Arts fellowships, and the dealer Betty Parsons was an early supporter.

It's especially refreshing to see Ms. Buchanan's 1981 earthwork "Marsh Ruins," for instance, as conversant with Robert Smithson's similarly diffuse, ephemeral land art. A three-part public sculpture in the Marshes of Glynn in Georgia, "Marsh Ruins" is, like Smithson's "Spiral Jetty," a marvel of engineered obsolescence. Ms. Buchanan documented its construction extensively, knowing that the waters would rise over and erode it.

Foreground, "Wall Column," and background, "Untitled (Frustula Series)" by Beverly Buchanan. Emon Hassan for The New York Times

But here is where the similarity ends: The Marshes of Glynn are the subject of an elegiac poem by Sidney Lanier, a former Confederate soldier, and are just a few miles from St. Simons Island, where a group of slaves committed suicide by drowning. The huddled concrete forms of "Marsh Ruins" are covered in a layer of tabby, a crushed-shell mixture used in the construction of plantations in the nearby Sea Islands. The piece summons Smithsonesque thoughts about geologic time, but it also poses questions that earthworks generally don't: Do social atrocities leave scars on the landscape? Can nature can ever again be a place of healing and respite?

Photographs and videos of “Marsh Ruins” and three other earthworks make up the first third of “Ruins and Rituals,” along with cast-concrete sculptures called “Frustula” that look like stacked and propped-up bricks; Ms. Buchanan has compared them to buildings under demolition, which she must have encountered frequently as an artist working in 1970s New York.

Just what it meant to be an artist in that time and place is explored by Ms. Buchanan in her prodigious archives, which make up the next third of the show and are more engrossing than they sound. Here are diaristic drawings of lunch foods and home remedies, wittily captioned photographs of Ms. Buchanan at work, photocopied booklets of advice for artists and humorous business cards (one reads: “Beverly Buchanan/Renaissance Woman” and lists her title as “sculptor, painter, adviser, gardener, racecar advocate.”)

Beverly Buchanan’s “Paper Shack,” from her exhibition “Ruins and Rituals,” part of “A Year of Yes” at the Brooklyn Museum.” Emon Hassan for The New York Times

Toward the exhibition’s conclusion, Ms. Buchanan’s life and work begin to overlap in fascinating ways with her earlier career in public health: in a 1992 figurative sculpture composed of Buchanan’s empty pill bottles, which she called “a tribute to All doctors, everywhere,” and, especially, in a gallery of what are known as her “shacks.” These brightly painted sculptures cataloging styles of Southern houses are accompanied by short texts, or “legends,” as the artist called them, that document their histories and the lives of their inhabitants. The models were the result of a kind of field work, similar to

her earlier investigations of disease outbreaks. As Ms. Buchanan observed, the work required the same sort of “questions and answers and talking to people.”

Her approach to art was holistic. She wrote in 1998: “I think that artists in the South must at some point confront the work of folk artists not so much in terms of the work but of the persons and the work as being of and from the same place with the same influences, food, dirt, sky, reclaimed land, development, violence, guns, ghosts and so forth.”

The wood, tar and clay model of “Nellie Rush’s House” (1994) and accompanying legend introduce us to Nellie Mae Rush, whose grandfather built the shotgun house in which she resided. The foam-core “House of Mystery (Florida Series)” dates from Ms. Buchanan’s trip to the hurricane-damaged Fort Pierce, along Florida’s east coast, where she found “visual storms between rooms and outside walls.”

And in a startling series of photographs, we meet Mary Lou Furcron — an older woman shown peering out from the doorway of a house she built with her own hands, from grasses and branches held together with mud. To paraphrase Ms. Buchanan, these pictures say, “Here I am; I’m still here” — sustaining words in an unexpectedly subdued “Year of Yes.”

“Beverly Buchanan — Ruins and Rituals” runs through March 5 at the Brooklyn Museum, 200 Eastern Parkway; 718-638-5000, brooklynmuseum.org.

A version of this review appears in print on November 11, 2016, on page C19 of the New York edition with the headline: The Architecture of Survival.